

75th Anniversary for Fairbury Area Chamber of Commerce

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The Fairbury Area Chamber of Commerce was founded by four businessmen in 1951. The year 2026 marks the 75th anniversary of this organization.

It is hard to imagine the mood and business climate in Fairbury in the early 1950s. The Korean War started in 1950, and people were hoping it would end soon. The war ended in 1953, ushering in a stretch of peace and prosperity.

In the early 1950s, the economy was strong: factories were busy, farm prices were relatively good, and small towns like Fairbury felt optimistic about long-term prosperity. Fairbury's population increased by 21 percent during the 1950s, from 2,433 to 2,937.

Across Illinois, many communities were formalizing or reviving chambers of commerce to promote business districts, recruit industry, and coordinate community events. New highways, improved trucking, and growing automobile ownership were changing how people shopped and traveled, pushing towns to “sell themselves” more aggressively.

About the same time the Fairbury Chamber of Commerce was formed, another organization, the Jaycees (the nickname for the Junior Chamber of Commerce), was formed. Most of the Chamber of Commerce members were older business owners. The Jaycees aimed for a younger group of men interested in improving the quality of life in Fairbury.

According to the Blade newspaper archives, the four businessmen who founded the Fairbury Chamber of Commerce in 1951 were most likely John P. Wade, Warren Beckley, Roy Taylor, and Albert Kilgus—all four owned and operated businesses in Fairbury. Roy Taylor was the longest-serving mayor in Fairbury's history. John P. Wade was the first president of the Fairbury Chamber of Commerce. The organization quickly grew to 125 members during its first year.

In May of 1952, the Fairbury Chamber of Commerce held its first dinner banquet. The 125 members and their wives had dinner in the high school's old gym. First-year president John P. Wade presided over the meeting. He traced the organization from the preliminary meetings the previous year and recounted the many activities. He listed many advantages of the community, such as being a wealthy agricultural community and shopping center, and having good schools, churches, water supply, streets, city government, industry, and many activities, as well as the Fairbury hospital and Fairbury Fair. Seven new retail businesses had been started in the last 12 months, he said.

Mr. Wade reported that one of the first activities of the new organization was providing facilities for the 300 to 400 pipeline workers who stayed in Fairbury until their work was

done. Shortly after that, a severe storm swept through Fairbury, knocking down many trees and branches. The Chamber of Commerce organized a massive volunteer effort to clear the downed trees and limbs.

Other accomplishments included installing an aircraft marker on the hangar north of Fairbury. The Chamber sponsored "two-dollar days" shopping promotions, the Fairbury Slogan Contest, Livestock Boosters meetings, and the Christmas Home Decoration Contest. The Chamber also arranged for a Santa house and for Santa Claus to make an appearance.

The Chamber also sponsored the first Community Sale in 1952. Mr. Wade reported it was a great success and had the potential to grow larger in future years. At this banquet, Secretary-Treasurer Albert Kilgus reported that \$6,143.21 had been received and \$3,320.09 had been paid out, leaving a balance of \$2,823.12. This balance would be equivalent to about \$34,882 in today's dollars.

For the second year of operation for the Fairbury Chamber of Commerce, Hartzell Munz was elected president. Other officers elected were Warren Beckley, vice-president; John P. Wade, secretary; and Albert Kilgus, treasurer.

The Fairbury Chamber of Commerce has been very involved in improving the Fairbury community, as evidenced by the 351 different articles in the Blade newspaper from 1951 to 2021.

In 1985, the Prairie Central School District was formed by the consolidation of the Fairbury, Forrest-Strawn-Wing, and Chatsworth school districts. This school consolidation also sparked a change in the way citizens in these towns thought. Rather than just thinking of their own town, many people began to see all the towns as part of the Prairie Central School District.

To reflect this change in public viewpoints, sometime around 2014, the Fairbury Chamber of Commerce began using the name Fairbury Area Chamber of Commerce to describe its wider membership and service area better.

According to the Fairbury Area Chamber of Commerce website, the organization today includes 104 member businesses and organizations from every corner of the local economy. Most are privately owned enterprises—retail stores, restaurants, trades and construction firms, manufacturers, farms, and service businesses—joined by banks, insurance and investment offices, and other professional services. Rounding out the roster are civic and nonprofit members such as the City of Fairbury, Dominy Memorial Library, churches, service clubs, and community foundations, reflecting how closely the Chamber's work now links the business community with public and volunteer institutions.

The Fairbury Area Chamber of Commerce has played a valuable role in improving the quality of life in the Fairbury area for the past 75 years. Hopefully, this organization will continue its community service for many more decades.

If you are interested in joining the Fairbury Area Chamber of Commerce, you can contact them through their website or Facebook page.

